

GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

3/1/2025

Early Autumn Trends in Rudbeckia hirta

Lowell Halvorson

A new trend is reshaping the early autumn market and new breeding in *Rudbeckia hirta* is leading the change. For years, the industry has been trying to expand the green decor market by using season extenders. In early autumn, this means re-igniting sales out of the gulch of late July and early August.

Traditionally the kick-off has been the back-to-school sales in late August, usually fed by shaded chrysanthemums. Nothing generates kvetching among growers more than shading chrysanthemums. It's tedious everyday work that's expensive for a crop with notoriously thin margins.

Plus, the mums don't always cooperate. When high summer heat lingers too long mums shift their bloom back on the calendar, but those back-to-school sales won't veer outside their specific two weeks. If you don't sell on time, you don't get the sale. This puts serious friction on moving chrysanthemum crops up-calendar, and fuels the current industry trend of chrysanthemums and pals—hunting for mum alternatives to extend the season.



Pictured 1. Size is the Sunbeckia's significant feature:

big flowers on hefty plants. Blossoms are larger than a pen, plants can fill and overspill a large pot with a single plug, and crops ship consistent habits in large volume. (Pictured: Luna.)

2. The R. hirta's primary job is the shop-and-drop container market. PGRs and water supply control the final size of Sunbeckias, so they can be programmed into a wide range of product price points. (Pictured: Isabella.)

3. Of special interest is the range of interesting blends and bicolors that extend the R. hirta look into new territory. Black-eyed Susans don't normally handle high fashion decor, but these do. (Pictured: Cherry.)

4. The full range of forms and their colors are available. Singles can have green eyes or brown. Semis come with red spots or not, and doubles can scale

The *R. hirta* answer

One focus of this effort is crops to fill the joint between summer and autumn, right before the chrysanthemums generally ship. Coleus are colorful and varied, but collapse at the hint of chill. Begonias resemble gumdrops and petunias can't handle the high heat. Lantanas and portulacas don't look anything like mums.

By contrast, *R. hirta* shows promise. Plants like the heat, bloom naturally in late summer and come in singles, semis and doubles. In addition, *R. hirta* offers a broad range of autumn colors and the plants kinda wanna grow in a mum-like fashion.

New breeding has sharpened these casual urges into a shippable product purpose-built for decor work in early autumn. A good example is the distinctive Sunbeckia series. Its massive flowers—as wide as a pencil is long—generated a stir at the Penn State, CSU and Welby trials the past couple of years.

Hefty plants support a large number of blooms so the display is impressive, but the true strength of Sunbeckia isn't the huge 6-in. flowers over the top. It's the flexibility the series gives horticultural designers to create a line of shop-and-drop products at multiple price points—all from a single plug that happens to like summer heat and sun. It's a chain store's dream.

Price and margin support

From a finished point-of-view, Sunbeckias offer lots of choices. Singles are available with green, brown or black eyes. Different flowers have different degrees of the center red spot: some clear, some with a soft center glow and a couple with a massive field of red. Degree of flower fuzziness can be ramped up from singles to semis to a teddy-bear style double. Be sure to peek at the specialty group where unusual scarlet, peach and bicolor varieties live.

By adjusting the PGR regime growers can shrink most Sunbeckias into a tight 6-in. pot for opening price points, grow out a mid-sized plant for larger pots or lean into the bushy, super-sized grande that's fit for a whiskey barrel. Some cultivars, if left to their natural growth, can reach nearly 2-ft. tall.

Sunbeckias feel tailored to the chain markets because, frankly, they are. Hartwig Bull, owner of Bull Plant Genetics, is a northern German grower who supplies central European chains with summer decor product. Year over year he bred these rudbeckias, honing them to fill a grower's specific needs: multiple sizes with a choice of colors and forms from a single plug, grown right after the spring crops.

Hartwig made nuanced selections to strengthen the plants. Extra large blooms required stems of steel—solid stakes of green to hold them up and support them. Flower petals had to be thick and stiff to handle overhead boom watering. Branching needed to start right from the bottom, generating lots of stems to fill the pot and cover the soil for a lush look gardeners associate with healthy plants.

Quirks to the north and south

Sunbeckias have an upside-down quirk as well. North and south are flipped because the bloom is triggered by long daylengths. This means northern growers in Canada can start shipping blooming products much earlier than the rest of the continent.

At the same time, Sunbeckias are hardy as far north as Zone 7. Southern professionals can plant them out as dramatic landscape displays in perennial beds—a big deal for resorts, hotel plazas, amusement parks and other southern destinations where the vista is important.

Folks like Metrolina and Lucas are already doing their spins on the rudbeckia strategy, and other growers are picking up on the technique. As a result, ignition for early autumn sales doesn't depend so heavily on the timing and health of chrysanthemums. Extending the autumn season earlier by shipping decor rudbeckia, then folding in the product line

as a supplement to the chrysanthemum ramp-up, is a good thing. **GT**

Lowell Halvorson is a consultant and writer in Fairfield, Connecticut, for retail and wholesale horticulture, specializing in business development. He also covers the breeding community for GrowerTalks magazine. You can contact him at (203) 257-9345 or halvorson@triadicon.com.